

The academic lectures of native English speakers: its complexities

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ABSTRAK

Makalah ini membentang satu gambaran umum wacana kuliah dan elemen-elemen yang berkemungkinan mempengaruhi kefahaman atau ketidakfahaman mengenai kuliah yang disampaikan oleh empat pensyarah di Lancaster Universiti, United Kingdom dari subjek disiplin yang berbeza. Pemerhatian telah dibuat ke atas wacana kuliah mereka yang telah direkod secara audio-video. Makalah ini dimulakan dengan penerangan asas dan cabaran dalam pendengaran kuliah diikuti dengan penerangan sedikit kajian ke atas penutur jati Inggeris. Hasil penemuan mengenengahkan cabaran kepada pelajar apabila mendengar wacana kuliah yang disampaikan oleh pensyarah penutur jati Inggeris.



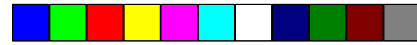
INTRODUCTION

This article presents an overview of the nature of lecture discourse and elements that may contribute to difficulties understanding and comprehending lectures delivered by Native English Speakers. It illustrates firstly the nature and demands of lecture listening followed by a descriptive account on the lectures of four male lecturers at Lancaster University, United Kingdom whose lectures are of different subject disciplines. Their lectures were observed and audio-video recorded. The analysis put forth the complexities of second language lecture listening that students of non native English may encounter when listening to Native English speaker lecturers.

LECTURES OF HIGHER INSTITUTIONS

Young (1994:160) asserts that 'if we can characterise the formal schema of university lectures for foreign students, their processing of information will be greatly facilitated'.





Spoken academic discourse in universities displays a variety of speech genres. One of these is the genre of academic lectures. Many studies (Flowerdew & Miller 1992; Huang 2004; 2005; 2006) have been carried out to research on lecture comprehension. These studies investigate problems that non native speaker (NNS) students encounter when listening to lectures.

Issues relating to problems or characteristics of L1 (first language) and L2 (second language) lecturers have also been investigated (Flowerdew & Miller 1996a; Morell 2004; Crawford Camiciottoli 2004, 2005). Some have even conducted research on training lecturers for international audiences (Lynch 1994) and on the discourse and teaching practices of the International Teaching Assistants: Williams (1992) and Tyler (1992). All these studies relate to specific issues addressed concerning student-teacher / student-lecturer interaction, with regard to lecture comprehension.

There are other aspects of lecture studies that are crucial and relevant. They are those that investigate the role and effects of discourse markers or signalling cues in lecture comprehension (Chaudron & Richards 1986; Flowerdew & Tarouza 1995; Jung 2003). There are other studies whose research focuses on aspects other than discourse markers as discourse signalling in academic lectures (De Carrico & Natingger 1988; Rilling 1996; Khuwaileh 1998; Nesi & Basturkmen 2006; Flowerdew 2006).

There have also been research studies on discourse organisation of lectures in terms of aspects of cohesion, text structuring and intonation (Thompson 1994; 2003), discourse management (Swales & Malczewski 2001) and tying asides in lectures (Strodt-Lopez 1991). Other studies have delved into discourse patterns and discourse marking of various disciplines. Dudley-Evans (1994) and Tarouza (1994) have studied the Hong Kong corpus of Computer Science and Information Systems lectures, and Olsen & Huckin (1990) looked at Point-driven understanding in engineering lecture comprehension.

One of these concerns the work of Flowerdew & Miller (1997), which poses the question of 'authenticity' in the teaching of academic listening. They highlighted in their findings the difference in micro structuring between authentic lectures from those written texts or scripted lectures. One of the differences they pointed out was the use of discourse markers such as *and*, *so*, *but*, in real lecture texts. They remark that:

Lectures are structured according to tone groups, often in the form of incomplete clauses, and often signaled by filled and unfilled pauses or micro level discourse markers such as *and*, *so*, *but*, *now*, and *okay*. (Flowerdew & Miller 1997: 33).



They believe that such uses of these words 'help to divide up the text and indicate topic shift' (Flowerdew & Miller 1997:33). This supports my exploration of the uses of these words and their significance in academic lectures. Schlee's (2005) research on the sociolinguistic variations of *okay*, *right*, *like* and *you know* in English academic discourse differs in that he investigates the uses of these markers based on gender, power, disciplines and context.

A generic approach to research into issues in English for Academic Purposes (EAP) has been adopted by many EAP practitioners as a basis to develop the most appropriate and realistic material for the practice of EAP academic listening. This generic approach refers to research investigations on the oral communication needs of specific English use (Murphy & Candlin 1979, Ferris & Tag 1996, Kim 2006) where the setting, the participants, and how the language is typically used are the main concerns. Research using genre analysis has contributed to EAP modules such as Medical English/Legal/Business English, amongst many others.

WHAT MAKES LECTURES DIFFICULT & WHAT MAKES THEM COMPREHENSIBLE

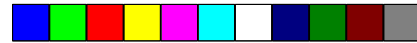


This section discusses the need to consider the complexities of lecture discourse that may pose difficulties for students in understanding lectures. As we understand, lectures are not merely long stretches of consistent links of main topics or sub topics. In reality, rather, they are complex, in the sense that they have spoken features (fillers, pauses, hesitations, signalling cues or markers); and non-linguistic features of slide presentations, writing on the board, distribution of handouts, classroom tasks - as well as speakers' digressions for asides, jokes and examples. All these incorporated features add to the complexities of understanding lectures and should be noted.

Several attempts have been made to research the difficulties in understanding lectures, especially for non-native students of English. Flowerdew (1994) poses that there is a difference between listening to conversations and lectures because of the amount of implied meaning or indirect speech acts in conversations. He further remarks that lectures generally emphasise on the information that is conveyed whereas conversations emphasise more on the interpersonal or illocutionary meanings as also emphasised by Brown & Yule (1983).

The emphasis in lectures is generally assumed to be on the information conveyed, on propositional meaning, while in conversation interpersonal or illocutionary meaning is more important (Brown & Yule 1983) (ibid, 1994:11).





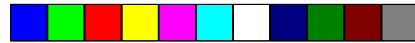
This suggests that the dense flow of information in lecture monologues involves markers that students may not know well, as they are used to speech which is more indirect and contains less information. There have been various studies (Chaudron & Richards 1986, Chung & Dunkel 1992, Flowerdew & Tarouza 1995, Flowerdew et.al 2000) that specifically discuss L2 students' difficulties to understand L2 lectures, and ways in which lecture materials are presented that make lectures easier to understand.

The fact that the nature of a lecture that is monologic adds further demands on both native and non-native listeners to understand, Thompson (1994) asserts that 'in order to achieve a coherent interpretation of monologue, the listener must be able to interpret the semantic relations lying beneath the surface text' (1994:58). She examines the interrelating roles which clause relations, lexico-grammatical cohesion and intonation choices play in creating a cohesive monologue; and believes that speakers can use these linguistic elements to signal 'explicitly the underlying network of concepts in the monologue, thus helping the listener to make a coherent interpretation of the text' (1994: 58). Thompson proposes that clause relations primarily show the underlying semantic structure of a text, and are important in the interpretations of the text. She argues that the absence of explicit surface markers, such as conjunctions, will pose difficulties though she finds that lexico-grammatical cohesion could indicate the scope of the clause relations. Thompson illustrates (in Example 1) three interacting lexical chains of lexico-grammatical cohesion in the extract, below, which concerns the following words: *scientist* and *engineer*, *provides* and *uses* and *tool*.

Example 1:

*so the scientist basically provides the tool.
and the engineer uses the tool.*

Another aspect which contributes to the difficulties in comprehending lectures is identified by Olsen & Huckin (1990): the strategies students employ to grasp information presented in lectures. They suggest that 'while linguistic shortcomings may contribute to incomprehension, they are certainly not the only impediments or even perhaps the most serious; instead discourse level cues seem more important' (1990: 34). What they suggest is that the lack of proficiency with regard perhaps to the lack of vocabulary, is not the main problem contributing to students' lack of comprehension in lectures. Olsen & Huckin (ibid.) assert that a more important factor is for the students' to recognise 'cues' within lecture talk.



Research on difficulties faced by L2 students in comprehending lectures is reported in Flowerdew & Miller's (1992) ethnographic study of student perceptions, problems and strategies in second-language lectures. Their subjects were 30 Hong Kong Cantonese-speaking students who were randomly chosen out of 60 students who were studying a BA TESL course. This study records student rating of their ability to comprehend lectures on a 9-point scale after the first lecture, and again later in the course of the 10-week lecture course. Students were also required to write a diary after each of the lectures describing their perceptions of the lecture, their problems and their strategies to comprehend the lectures. They selected 8 students for interviews on the basis of the students' various levels of proficiency in listening. The three main problems students perceived were speed of delivery, new terminology and concepts and difficulties in concentrating. The students found that speaking too fast causes difficulty for them to understand and that new vocabulary, terminology or concepts hinder their understanding and importantly their difficulties to concentrate.

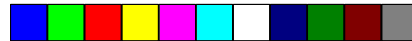
Note-taking is another aspect of lecture listening. Badger et al. (2001) focus on students' views on note-taking before, during and after the lectures. I will highlight their views on note-taking during the lectures, as these views may shed light on understanding how lectures are presented, particularly with regard to the cues students use to grasp information. Badger et al. (ibid.) categorise students' responses into general guidelines of note-taking, according to the kinds of information they make notes on, and the cues they use for taking notes. With regard to the general guidelines of note-taking, half of the subjects said they noted down key points. Others said they noted what they thought would be useful for exams and essays, with a minority who said they noted down everything during the lectures. The kinds of information that students made notes on were identified as factual information, lecturers' opinions and their own ideas or responses.

Besides the research to investigate what makes lectures difficult to comprehend, there have also been studies researching factors that they find make lectures more comprehensible. One such piece of research is that of Chaudron & Richards (1986), who identified two ideas that emphasise the importance of discourse structuring signals, which they believe could aid students to better comprehend lectures:

- 1) Discourse markers are important in lecture comprehension.
- 2) Discourse markers can be labelled with different terms.
They have labelled them as 'micro' and 'macro' markers.

In addition, De Carrico & Natinger (1988) believe that 'chunks' of language or perhaps lexical phrases such as; *as it were*, *that goes without*





saying, on the other hand in lectures could improve students' understanding of the lectures. They remark that these markers:

...enhance students' ability to comprehend lectures, principally by teaching them to 'predict' what type of information is coming up next and to 'organise' and 'interpret' the flow of information more easily (1988: 91).

In discussions of academic lectures, it is necessary to address factors that contribute to ways in which individual lectures vary. The next section presents a discussion on the variations in lecturing styles between lecturers in university teaching by the English Native Speaker lecturers.

THE LECTURERS

The lecturers involved in this research were four male lecturers at Lancaster University from various subject disciplines. They were selected based on the following criteria:

- * Lecturers who had got teaching merits for good performance during training conducted by CELT.
- * Lecturers who had received Teaching Awards and had received good evaluative feedback from their students.

These lecturers were those who lecture Macro Economics, Physical Geography, Environmental Science and Advanced Corporate Finance. To facilitate discussions in this paper, each of the lecturers is labelled as Lecturer A, B, C and D. A brief profile of each of the lecturers is presented in Table 1.



**TABLE 1:** Lecturer's profile

Age	Lecturer A 45-50	Lecturer B 40-45	Lecturer C 40-45	Lecturer D 40-45
British English native speaker	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Hometown/regional background	Cardiff	Nottingham	Suffolk	South east
Brought up in a bilingual context	Yes Native welsh speaker	No	No	No
Educational background: British Educational in institution	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Been teaching in Britain exclusively	No USA, Australia and Beijing	No USA Scotland	Yes	No France, Portugal
Years of teaching experience	25	12	13	12

There is no one standardised style of lecturing in delivering lectures, though there is a difference between giving a talk in a lecture in comparison to a classroom seminar. There are factors that affect the variations in the instructional methods that one adopts in university teaching. Saroyan & Snell (1997: 85) believe that they are partially due to 'one's philosophy and beliefs about teaching, the pedagogical principles incorporated in the instruction and resources and realities surrounding the instructional situation'.

The responses gathered from interviews with the respective lecturers indicate that these lecturers have their own principles and beliefs to justify their ways of lecturing, or their styles when asked about them. Below (Example 2) are the responses from Lecturer B and Lecturer C with regard to lecturing.

Example2:

[LB]: *'I see lecturing as a theatrical presentation'*

[LC]: *'I went to a training course and found out that students do not have that long an attention span to continuously listen. That's why I believe the lecturers need to have some sort of group task or activity'*

THE LECTURE MODES

The emergence of the lecture modes employed by each lecturer was noted during personal observations of each lecturer. These modes are as follows:

- * monologic (speaking);
- * monologic (writing);
- * monologic (reference to visuals);
- * interactive;
- * task-based instruction.

Table 2 illustrates the presence or absence of the various lecture modes in each of the lecturers.

TABLE 2: Lecture modes employed by the lecturers

Lecture mode	Monologic speaking	Monologic writing	Monologic reference to visual	Interactive	Task-based instruction
LA	✓	✓	✓	✓ ✓	X
LB	✓	X	✓ ✓	X	X
LC	✓	✓	✓	✓ ✓	✓
LD	✓	✓	✓	✓ ✓	X

The table illustrates the phases of lecture modes used by the lecturers where ✓ shows the presence of the mode in the discourse, compared to its absence - shown as an X. A double tick ✓ ✓ indicates the lecturer's more



frequent mode employed in his lectures when compared to the other modes. The overall view of the table indicates that all lecturers except for Lecturer B had engaged in the interactive mode rather frequently in their lectures.

THE LECTURING STYLES

Lecturing styles at universities are not dictated and do not display a standardised delivery style. In relation to lecturing styles, Bligh remarks that:

There may be some wrong ways, but there are many rights ways.
If everyone lectured the same way, students' academic diet would be very monotonous (1998).

The lecture modes help with the labelling of the individual lecturer's styles of lecturing. There are three main categories and they are defined rather as examples of: *conversational*, *elicitative task-based* or *expository* style.

- * *Conversational* style - This is an informal style of lecturing. The lecturer speaks informally with rather explicit use of the various conversational features. There are mainly instances of teacher-student interaction and evidence of the lecturers making attempts to involve students by posing questions. The lecturer is also rather mobile during their presentations; walking and pacing towards the audience.
- * *Elicitative task-based* style - This style has all the characteristics of the conversational style with rather consistent use of elicitations in the lectures. The lecturer rather consistently elicits information from the students through question/answer exchanges as the lecture progresses - often in the form of feedback from task-based activities.
- * *Expository* style - This style is a formal style of lecturing as opposed to the conversational style. The lecturer speaks rather formally, using the least number the conversational features - possibly not using any at all. There are no instances of teacher-student interaction, with no posing of questions. The lecturer's mobility is confined to the immediate area around the lecture platform.

The labelling of each lecturer's style of lectures is as such:

Lecturer A: Conversational style
Lecturer B: Expository style
Lecturer C: Elicitative task-based style
Lecturer D: Conversational style





LECTURER A (L.A): MACROECONOMICS

This course is a follow-up undergraduate course from the Micro Economics course that most students would have taken in the previous semester offered by the Management School. They are compulsory for certain groups of students and elective for others. This lecture is the largest amongst the four lectures, with 200-220 students, the majority of these being first-year undergraduates. The lecture consists of a mixed range of native-speaker students, with a rather larger number of non-native speaker students from Asia - mainly Chinese. The lecture duration is one hour, twice a week, and it runs for 5 consecutive weeks. Lecturer A's conversational style of lecturing seems to have an effective impact on this kind of setting, especially when the lecture size is large, also with a rather large contingent of international students. His mobility, often pacing towards the students, and use of kinesics communication during his lectures seems to create an effective interactive class ambience.

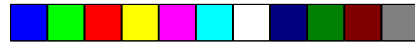
LECTURER B (LB): PHYSICAL GEOGRAPHY

This course is offered mainly to second-year undergraduate students and it is compulsory. The class size is the second biggest amongst the four, as it has about 100 students, mostly native speakers of English. Students who take this course are mainly from a science background. The lecture duration is an hour and it runs twice a week for 4 consecutive weeks. Although Lecturer B is not conversational in his lecturing style, his expository style seems appropriate to this type of lecture setting. This is perhaps because of the nature of his subject explanations, which are mainly factual and thus requires him to refer to pictorial visuals on his slides in most instances. He is less 'mobile' than Lecturer A, though he paces rather constantly at the lecture platform. He is interactive to a certain extent with his occasional use of the interactive feature 'okay'? in his lectures and his use of hand gestures as he explains; as I observe in his lectures.

LECTURER C (LC): ENVIRONMENTAL SCIENCE

This is an elective course offered to 60-70 second-year undergraduates as well as some Masters-level students, and the course content centres on the philosophical aspects of environmental science. The majority of students are native speakers, with only a small number of international students, mainly Europeans. The lecture duration is one hour, 3 times a week for 5 consecutive weeks. Lecturer C's elicitive style of lecturing seems to generate group discussion. As with Lecturer A, the nature of the subject involves extensive explanations of consequences of events, where both lecturers make reference to visuals.





LECTURER D (LD): ADVANCED CORPORATE FINANCE

ACF is a compulsory course offered to MSc students of the Management School. Though the lecture is considered large for an MSc course, it has a smaller number of students than the previous lecture, and is attended by some 70-80 students. The majority of those registered are international students from Asia, Africa and other European countries. The lecture duration is one and a half hours, 3 times a week and the module runs for one complete semester. Lecturer D's style of lecturing is mainly conversational but he incorporates most of the lecture modes I have categorised. He uses the monologic writing and refers to visual modes most consistently than other lecturers. This is perhaps due to the nature of the subject content requiring the explanation of formulas, to a certain extent. His lecturing style on the whole seems to have a rather effective impact on the teaching and learning in such a setting.

CONCLUSION

My descriptions of the lectures have raised the possible relationship between the lecturers' lecturing styles and the subject content. The descriptions of how each lecture style has an effective impact on the setting supports Nesi's (2001:216) remark that 'lecture delivery style is affected by the context and purpose of the lecture'. She points out that the link between the speed of delivery and lexical density that affects lecturing styles may be due to:

- * *lecturers not expecting their listeners to record much of what they say;*
 - * *lecturers not presenting new and complex propositions;*
 - * *the content being fairly predictable;*
 - * *the lecture is not being part of an assessed course of study.*
- (Nesi 2001: 216)

Based on all these lines of research into lectures, the genre of lectures involves several kinds of variation.

1. That lectures can be difficult and easy to comprehend.
2. The discourse organisation structures of a lecture.
3. The various styles of lecturing.

The first two interrelate to a certain extent. The difficulties students face with lecture comprehension, and what makes lectures easier to understand



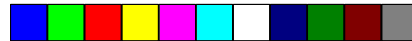
correlate with the way the respective lecture discourse is structurally organised. The third element would, to a certain extent, relate to the way the discourse is structured by an individual's style of lecturing. All these will contribute to the complexities of listening to lectures by native English speaker lecturers which students of non native speakers may encounter in their studies at higher institutions of English speaking ambience.

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